

A pine cone could be a new symbol for an ancient Jewish tradition



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Rabbi Matt Soffer of Temple Israel was on the hunt for pine cones for Passover at the Arboretum.

By [Lisa Wangsness](#) | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 30, 2017

At Passover Seders, symbolic foods bring alive the story of the Jews' exodus from bondage in ancient Egypt. Bitter herbs are a reminder of suffering. Charoset — a paste of fruit, wine, nuts, and spices — recalls the mortar used in slaves' labor. Unleavened matzo, the haste of their departure.

In recent times, some Jews have added more symbols to link their liberation story to other struggles — an orange for lesbian and gay Jews; an olive for Middle East peace; a chocolate bean as a reminder of child labor.

This year, Boston's largest Reform synagogue is proposing an addition: a pine cone. The spiky pod is meant to represent prisons and highlight the criminal justice legislative efforts on Beacon Hill.

Why a pine cone? Like inmates, the pine nuts inside are valuable but unseen, easily forgotten, and difficult to extract from the tough exterior, said Rabbi Matt Soffer of Temple Israel

The gesture, which has garnered national attention, comes at a crucial moment, with criminal justice reform leading the legislative agenda.

But advocates fear the changes under consideration may not be bold enough to change what they call a mass incarceration system. State data show black defendants are locked up at eight times the rate of white defendants.

“The teaching that commands us to see ourselves as having come out of Egypt

The Passover story is at the heart of Jewish identity, and its retelling around Seder tables each year is an elemental Jewish experience across generations. But Soffer said Passover is also a time to recall that the purpose of Judaism is to be outwardly focused, to “make the world more loving.”

“When I look at our society right now — and it’s a very hard society to look at right now — [criminal justice reform] is an area where we can actually make concrete change,” he said.

The new ritual is part of Temple Israel’s recent work on racial justice, which has focused on the penal system and economics. In the months to come, synagogue members will try to find practical ways to make a difference, such as supporting African-American-owned businesses, said Andrew Tarsy, a civil rights lawyer and congregant who is leading the racial justice initiative.

“We need to participate,” he said. “We need to listen to those in the black community who are experiencing racial injustice on a daily basis, and we need to be of use.”

Congregational leaders saw a chance to highlight the importance of that work in the symbolism of the most widely celebrated ritual of the Jewish year.

“We’re not just talking about numbers,” said Kathy Weinman, a congregant and former president of the Boston Bar Association who is directing the synagogue’s efforts on criminal justice. “We’re talking about people’s lives and families’ lives and the strength of communities.”

Religious groups, including the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization and the Roman Catholic bishops, have pushed hard for criminal justice changes. Proponents say the involvement of religious activists could affect whether robust legislation makes it through the Legislature this year.

Top state officials have introduced legislation designed to help those who are released from prison avoid committing new crimes. But longtime proponents of criminal justice reform say that proposal does not go far enough. They’re pressing



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A pine cone collected by Rabbi Matt Soffer of Temple Israel.

for changes to sentencing laws, such as ending mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses.

“The big push from outside of the building is what will make the difference between a piecemeal bill and a genuinely comprehensive, game-changer piece of legislation,” said state Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz, an advocate for sweeping change.

Chang-Diaz, a practicing Catholic who is raising her children Jewish, called the Passover pine cone “thoughtful and apt symbolism” to add to a holiday she loves and sometimes describes as “like Thanksgiving, but with singing and justice.”

“I can’t think of a better issue to tie in than criminal justice this year,” she said.

But there is not universal support on Beacon Hill or in courthouses for such broad changes.

Some prosecutors and law enforcement officials maintain there remains a place for limited, judicious use of minimum mandatory sentences.

The Rev. Ray Hammond, pastor of Bethel AME Church in Jamaica Plain, a congregation involved in criminal justice reform efforts for years, said he hopes more religious communities join Temple Israel in connecting the issue “intimately to the issues of justice in their Scriptures, in terms of their practice, and in terms of their experience as faith communities.”

All of society has a vested interest in fixing a system that he says incapacitates so many individuals and diverts money from other important social needs.

“Every dollar we’re putting to incarceration,” he said, “isn’t going to education, isn’t going to economic development, isn’t going to substance abuse crisis.”

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, the largest branch of Judaism in the United States, is including Soffer’s Passover pine cone meditation on its website’s Passover tool kit, a popular spot for downloading supplemental Seder

readings for Passover, which starts at sundown on April 10. Soffer has also included a recipe from one of his congregants for pine nut charoset — “the charoset of clemency.”

Rabbi Jonah Pesner, the Religious Action Center’s director and a former rabbi at Temple Israel, said racial justice work is a focal point of the Reform movement right now. Congregations across the country are participating in the center’s call to “reflect, relate, reform” — that is, to learn and think deeply about racism, develop community partnerships across racial lines, and to lobby for policy changes that could help dismantle structural racism.

Pesner called mass incarceration “the civil rights challenge of our moment.” Speaking on a cellphone as he walked in Washington, D.C., Pesner said he was struck by the beauty of the image.

“I’m seeing these pine cones emerging from the snow — they have this incredibly tough exterior. . . . In this almost cage-like natural formation is the redemptive hope for the entire tree.”

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